



**PRESS RELEASE FROM
KLAMATH BASIN
FEDERAL WORKING GROUP**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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**KLAMATH WORKING GROUP HOLDS FIRST MEETING, ANNOUNCES
MEASURES TO ASSIST FARMERS AND RANCHERS, CONSERVE FISH**

(WASHINGTON) -- At its first meeting today, the Klamath River Basin Federal Working Group announced a number of steps the Federal government is taking to assist farmers and ranchers in Oregon's Klamath Basin who depend on water for irrigation and conserve the basin's fish and wildlife.

"President Bush instructed us to move quickly to address the complex economic and natural resource issues in the Klamath River Basin when he established the working group last week," said Interior Secretary Gale Norton, who chairs the group. "We are pleased to be able to announce substantive actions at our first meeting that will help both people and fish and wildlife resources."

"Farmers and ranchers in the Klamath Basin have suffered economic hardship due to scarcity of water," said Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman. "Today, we are announcing a series of conservation actions that will enhance water quality to help increase the amount of water available to farmers and ranchers around the Klamath Basin."

"The challenges facing the people who live and work in the Klamath Basin are great," said Commerce Secretary Don Evans. "The decisions made by the government will have a profound impact on the region's economy and its environment. For the reason we are committed to ensuring that our decisions are based on sound science and maximum input from all stakeholders."

"I'm very pleased to be working with my colleagues in the Administration on President Bush's Klamath Basin Working Group," said Chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality James Connaughton. "One of the best ways we can meet the needs of farmers and ranchers as well as fish and wildlife in the Klamath Basin is through improving water quality. We recognize that this is a complex situation that requires a dedicated effort at all levels of government—that's why we're hitting the ground running in our efforts to identify steps we can take to increase both the quality

and quantity of water in the basis.”

The working group was established March 1, by President Bush. The measures announced at the meeting held in Washington include:

- The Agriculture Department will provide more than \$1.6 million to accelerate the delivery of conservation, technical and financial assistance for irrigation water management, filter strips and creation of wildlife habitat to improve water quality and result in a water savings of up to 30 percent in some cases.

In addition, USDA will extend the sign-up period for the Emergency Conservation Program through September 2002, to give farmers and ranchers additional opportunities for financial assistance to assist in obtaining an adequate water supply for livestock

In direct relief, USDA will work with farmers and ranchers to explore opportunities for delaying loan repayments, rescheduling or consolidating loans or even writing down of some indebtedness.

The U.S. Forest Service will begin 22 special projects in the Wimena-Fremont National Forest to provide more than 20 miles of stream improvement, decommission nearly 45 miles of roads and provide for meadow enhancement and spring protection.

- The Commerce Department will make producing the biological opinion for operation of the Klamath Project its highest priority. “At the Department of Commerce, we are committed to provide a scientifically sound and legally defensible biological opinion as soon as possible,” Evans said. “To meet this obligation, I have directed Dr. Bill Hogarth, the administrator of the National Marine Fisheries Service, to make this his agency’s highest priority.” Secretary Norton echoed Secretary Evans’ statement with respect to the priority the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will give to its work on the biological opinion.
- The Interior Department’s Bureau of Reclamation will accelerate the construction of proposed fish screens on A Canal, the major water diversion point out of Upper Klamath Lake, once the design phase is completed. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has identified screening as an important step to avoid loss of endangered fish. The screens will be completed by the beginning of the irrigation season on April 1, 2003, a growing season ahead of the original schedule. The screens and pumps will return them to the lake. The total cost of the project is estimated to be close to \$14 million.

A photograph of the meeting will be posted on the Web at www.wirepix.com/newsphotos/index.php3 at 5 p.m.